

Beloved _ Toni Morrison

➤ Toni Morrison (1931 –2019)

- Toni Morrison is an American novelist, editor and professor.
- Her novels are known for their epic themes, vivid dialogue and richly detailed characters.
- Her best known novels are *The Bluest Eye* (1970), *Sula* (1973), *Song of Solomon* (1977) and *Beloved* (1987).
- She won Pulitzer Prize and American Book Award in 1988, for “Beloved”.
- She also got Nobel Prize in Literature in 1993.
- In 2012 she got the Presidential Medal of Freedom.
- At the age of 12 she became a Catholic and received the baptismal name Anthony which later became the basis for her nickname ‘Toni’.
- She played a vital role in bringing “Black Literature” into mainstream, editing books by authors such as Henry Dumas, Toni Cade Bambara, Angela Davis and Gayl Jones.
- Her first novel is *The Bluest Eye* (1970).
- In 1975, her novel *Sula* (1973) was nominated for the National Book Award.
- Her third novel ‘*Song of Solomon*’ (1977) brought her national attention.
- The book was a main selection of the Book of Month Club, the first novel by a black writer to be chosen since Richard Wright’s *Native Son* (1940).
- ‘*Song of Solomon*’ won national Book critic circle award.
- Morrison lecture entitled “The Future of Time: Literature and Diminished Expectations” began with the aphorism “Time it seems has no future”.
- She wrote a dantesque trilogy (*Beloved*, *Jazz*, *Paradise*).

➤ Important Works of Morrison :

- ***The Bluest Eye* (1970)**
 - It is split into an untitled prelude and four units each named after a season begin with Autumn and end with Summer.
 - The story is about a year in the life of a young black girl named Pecola who develops an inferiority complex due to her eye colour and skin appearance.
 - Narrator – Claudia MacTeer. Protagonist—Pecola Breedlove.
 - It is set in Lorain Ohio against the backdrop of America’s Midwest during the years following The Great Oppression.
- ***Sula* (1973)**
 - The Main Antagonist – Sula Peace
 - Sula Peace has a birth mark - “that spread from the middle of the lid toward the eyebrow, shaped something like a stemmed rose”.
- ***Song of Solomon* (1977)**
 - It follows the life of Macon Milkman Dead III, an African American man living in Michigan from birth to adulthood.
- ***Tar Baby* (1981)**
- ***Beloved* (1987)**
- ***Jazz* (1992): Historical Novel**
- ***Paradise* (1997)**
 - It begins with – “They shoot the white girl first”
- ***Love* (2003)**
- ***A Mercy* (2008)**
- ***Home* (2012)**
- ***God Help the Child* (2015)**
- ***Playing in the Dark: Whitens and the Literary Imagination* (1992)**

Short Fiction

- *Recitatif* (1983)

Plays

- *Dreaming Eminett* (1986)
- *Desdemona* (2011)

Libretto (Musical Work)

- *Margaret Garner* (2005)

Beloved (1987)

- It is set after American civil war (1861 – 1865). It is inspired by the story of an African American Margaret Garner, who escaped slavery in Kentucky late Jan 1856 by fleeing to Ohio, a free state.
- In the novel the protagonist Sethe, is also a slave who escapes by running to Cinannati, Ohio. Sethe kills her two year old daughter rather than allow her to be recaptured and taken back to Sweet home.
- It concerns the story of Sethe and her daughter Denver after their escape from slavery. A woman presumed to be her daughter called 'Beloved' years later to haunt Sethe's home at Ohio.
- Beloved is inspired by an event that actually happened: Margaret Garner, an enslaved person in Kentucky, who escaped and fled to the free state of Ohio in 1856. She was subject to capture in accordance with the Fugitive Slave Act of 1850; when U.S. marshals burst into the cabin where Garner and her husband had barricaded themselves, she was attempting to kill her children, and had already killed her two-year-old daughter, to spare them from being returned to slavery.
- Morrison had come across an account of Garner titled "A Visit to the Slave Mother who Killed Her Child" in an 1856 newspaper article published in the American Baptist, and reproduced in The Black Book, a miscellaneous compilation of black history and culture that Morrison edited in 1974.
- The novel won the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction in 1988 and was a finalist for the 1987 National Book Award.
- It was adapted as a 1998 movie of the same name, starring Oprah Winfrey.
- A survey of writers and literary critics compiled by The New York Times ranked it as the best work of American fiction from 1981 to 2006.
- The book's dedication reads "Sixty Million and more", referring to the Africans and their descendants who died as a result of the Atlantic slave trade.
- The book's epigraph is Romans 9:25.
- Throughout the novel, Paul D is sitting on a base of some sort or a foundation like a tree stub or the steps, for instance. This exemplifies his place in society. Black men are the foundation of society because without their hard labor, the white men would not profit.

Plot summary:

Beloved begins in 1873 in Cincinnati, Ohio, with Sethe, a formerly enslaved woman, and her 18-year-old daughter Denver, who live at 124 Bluestone Road. The site has been haunted for years by what they believe is the ghost of Sethe's eldest daughter. Denver is shy, friendless, and housebound. Sethe's sons, Howard and Buglar, ran away from home by the age of 13, which she believes was due to the ghost. Baby Suggs, the mother of Sethe's husband Halle, died soon after the boys fled, eight years before the start of the novel.

One day, Paul D, one of the enslaved men from Sweet Home, the plantation where Sethe, Halle, Baby Suggs, and several others were once enslaved, arrives at Sethe's home. He forces out the spirit, receiving Denver's contempt for driving away her only companion, but persuades them to leave the house together for the first time in years for a carnival. Upon returning home, they find a young woman sitting in front of the house who calls herself Beloved. Paul D is suspicious and warns Sethe, but she is charmed by the young woman and ignores him. Denver is eager to care for the sickly Beloved, whom she begins to believe is her older sister come back.

Paul D begins to feel increasingly uncomfortable in the house and that he is being driven out. One night, Paul D is cornered by Beloved, who demands sex. While they have sex, his mind is filled with horrific memories from his past. Paul D tries to tell Sethe about it, but cannot. Instead, he says that he wants her pregnant. Sethe is afraid to have to live for a baby. When Paul D tells friends at work about his plans to start a new family, they react fearfully. One, Stamp Paid, reveals the reason for the community's rejection of Sethe.

Paul D confronts Sethe, who tells him that after escaping from Sweet Home and joining her children at 124, four horsemen came to return her children and her to a life of slavery at Sweet Home. Sethe ran to the woodshed with her children and tried to kill them all, but only had time to kill her eldest daughter. Sethe says that she was "trying to put [her] babies where they would be safe". Paul D leaves, telling her her love is "too thick"; she retorts that "thin love is no love", adamant that she did the right thing.

Sethe comes to believe that Beloved is the daughter she had killed, as "BELOVED" was all she could afford to have engraved on her tombstone. She is overjoyed, holding onto a hope that Halle and her sons will come back and they will all be a family together. Out of guilt, she begins to spend all of her time and money on Beloved to please her and try to explain her actions, and loses her job. Beloved becomes angry and demanding, throwing tantrums when she does not get her way. Beloved's presence consumes Sethe's life. She hardly eats, while Beloved grows bigger and bigger, eventually taking the form of a pregnant woman. Denver reveals her fear of Sethe, having known that she killed Beloved, but not having understood why, and that her brothers shared this fear and ran away due to it. Sethe and Beloved's voices merge until indistinguishable, and Denver observes that Sethe becomes more like a child, while Beloved seems more like the mother.

Denver reaches out to the Black community for help, from whom they had been isolated because of envy of Baby Suggs' privilege and horror at Sethe killing Beloved. Local women come to the house to exorcise Beloved. At the same time, a White man, Mr. Bodwin (their landlord, who had offered work to Baby Suggs and Sethe) arrives at the house on a horse for Denver, who asked him for a job. Not knowing this, Sethe attacks him with an ice pick, thinking he was Schoolteacher coming back for her daughter. The village women and Denver hold her back and Beloved disappears.

Denver becomes a working member of the community, and Paul D returns to a bed-ridden Sethe, who, devastated at Beloved's disappearance, remorsefully tells him that Beloved was her "best thing". He replies that Sethe is her own "best thing", leaving her questioning, "Me? Me?" As time goes on, those who knew Beloved gradually forget her until all traces of her are gone.

Major themes:

- Mother-daughter relationships
- Psychological effects of slavery
- Definition of manhood
- Family relationships
- Pain
- Heroism

Major characters:

Sethe

Sethe is the protagonist of the novel. She escaped slavery from a plantation called Sweet Home. She lives in the house named 124 (a house on 124 Bluestone Rd., but referred to only as "124") which is believed to be haunted because she killed her infant child there. Her two sons have fled because of the haunting, and she resides in the house with her daughter Denver. She is motherly and will do anything to protect her children from suffering the same abuses she experienced when she was enslaved. She is greatly influenced by her repression of the trauma she endured;; she lives with "a tree on her back", scars from being whipped. Her character is resilient, yet defined by her traumatic past. She was 19 years old when Denver was born, making her birth year to be 1836.

Beloved

The opaque understanding of Beloved is central to the novel. She is a young woman who mysteriously appears from a body of water near Sethe's house, and is discovered soaking wet on the doorstep by Sethe, Paul D, and Denver, on their return from visiting the fair; they take her in. She is widely believed to be the murdered baby who haunted 124, as the haunting ends when she arrives, and in many ways she behaves like a child. As also mentioned, a young woman enslaved by a White man nearby had escaped, and Beloved recounts stories of past slaves, including Sethe's mother. Morrison stated that the character Beloved is the daughter Sethe killed. The murdered baby was unnamed, so her name is derived from the engraving on Sethe's murdered baby's tombstone, which simply read "Beloved" because Sethe could not afford to engrave the word "Dearly" or anything else. Beloved becomes a catalyst to bring repressed trauma of the family to the surface, but also creates madness in the house and slowly depletes Sethe.

Paul D

Paul D retains his slave name; most of the enslaved men at Sweet Home were named Paul. He also retains many painful memories from enslavement and being forced to live in a chain gang; he had been moving around continuously before arriving at 124. He has a "tobacco tin" for a heart, in which he contains his painful memories, until Beloved opens it. Years after their time together at Sweet Home, Paul D and Sethe reunite and begin a romantic relationship. He acts fatherly towards Denver and is the first to be suspicious of Beloved. Despite their long past, he fails to understand Sethe fully because of her motherhood and because of the many years that had passed since.

Denver

Denver is Sethe's only child who remains at House 124. Isolated from her community after Beloved's killing, Denver forms a close bond with her mother. Upon Beloved's arrival, Denver watches as her sister's ghost begins to exhibit demonic activity. Although introduced as a childish character, Denver develops into a protective woman throughout the novel. In the final chapters, Denver fights not only for her personal independence, but also for her mother's wellbeing, breaking the cycle of isolation at House 124. She is 18 years old at the beginning of the novel.

Baby Suggs

Baby Suggs is Sethe's mother-in-law. Her son Halle worked to buy her freedom, after which she travels to Cincinnati and establishes herself as a respected leader in the community, preaching for the Black people to love themselves because other people will not. This respect turns sour after she turns some food into a feast, earning their envy, as well as Sethe's act of infanticide. Baby Suggs retires to her bed, where she thinks about pretty colors for the rest of her life. She dies at 70 in the beginning of the book, 8 years before the main events.

Halle

Halle is the son of Baby Suggs, the husband of Sethe and father of her children. Sethe and he were married in Sweet Home, yet they got separated during her escape. He is only mentioned in flashbacks. Paul D was the last to see Halle, churning butter at Sweet Home. He is presumed to have gone mad after seeing residents of Sweet Home violating Sethe. He is hardworking and good, qualities that Paul D sees in Denver at the end of the book, but ones that Baby Suggs fears make him a target.

Schoolteacher

Schoolteacher is the primary discipliner, violent, abusive, and cruel to the people he enslaved at Sweet Home, whom he views as animals. He comes for Sethe following her escape, but she kills her daughter and is arrested, instead.

Amy Denver

Amy Denver is a young white girl who finds Sethe desperately trying to make her way to safety after her escape from Sweet Home, trying to get to Boston herself. Sethe is extremely pregnant at the time, and her feet are bleeding badly from the travel. Amy helps nurture her and deliver Sethe's daughter on a small boat, and Sethe names the child Denver after her.

- The publication of *Beloved* in 1987 resulted in the greatest acclaim yet for Morrison. Although nominated for the National Book Award, it did not win, and 48 African-American writers and critics—including Maya Angelou, Amiri Baraka, Jayne Cortez, Angela Davis, Ernest J. Gaines, Henry Louis Gates Jr., Rosa Guy, June Jordan, Paule Marshall, Louise Meriwether, Eugene Redmond, Sonia Sanchez, Quincy Troupe, John Edgar Wideman, and John A. Williams—signed a letter of protest that was published in *The New York Times Book Review* on January 24, 1988. Yet later in 1988 *Beloved* did receive the Pulitzer Prize for Fiction,[30] as well as the Robert F. Kennedy Memorial Book Award, the Melcher Book Award, the Lyndhurst Foundation Award, and the Elmer Holmes Bobst Award.
- Some reviewers have excoriated the novel for what they consider its excessive sentimentality and sensationalistic depiction of the horrors of slavery, including its characterization of the slave trade as a Holocaust-like genocide. Others, while concurring that *Beloved* is at times overwritten, have lauded the novel as a profound and extraordinary act of imagination.
- On November 5, 2019, the BBC News listed *Beloved* on its list of the 100 most influential novels.
- **Banning and controversy:**
 - *Beloved* has been banned from five U.S. schools. Common reasons for censorship include bestiality, infanticide, sex, and violence.
 - In 2007, twenty years after its 1987 publication, the novel was abruptly abandoned by an AP English class at Eastern High School in Louisville, Kentucky, at the order of the school's principal. The class had nearly reached the end of the book when a parent complained about language on page 13.
 - In Virginia, *Beloved* was considered for removal from the Fairfax County senior English reading list due to a parent's 2017 complaint that "the book includes scenes of violent sex, including a gang rape, and was too graphic and extreme for teenagers". Parental concern about *Beloved*'s content inspired the *Beloved Bill*, legislation that would have required Virginia public schools to notify parents of any "sexually explicit content" and provide an alternative assignment if requested. The bill was vetoed by Governor Terry McAuliffe. When McAuliffe ran again for the governor's office in 2021, a major event in the election was his statement during a debate that, "Yeah, I stopped the bill that—I don't think parents should be telling schools what they should teach." His opponent, Glenn Youngkin, seized on the remark, and produced a television commercial in which a parent recounted her effort to get the book banned. The commercial did not mention the title, author, or subject of the book, but focused on the "explicit material" in the unnamed work.
